

# RollPlay

GM

NOTEBOOK

ISSUE 11

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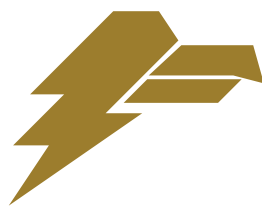
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## Welcome, Patrons!

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 10 of the GM's Notebook.

Adam Koebel / RollPlay GM



# Roll Play

## TALES FROM THE LOOP

### ONE SHOT

## NOSTALGIA ENGINES

Choosing the right game for a one shot is always a little tricky. We have to pick a game that's well designed enough to be learned, played and understood in a short time. We have to choose a system that'll be fun to watch and offer some interesting depth without being overwhelming to the audience (it's important for us that you're all able to follow along with the rules and know what rolls mean, etc.) We have to pick a game whose subject matter, whether it's superheroes, space adventures or whatever, is going to be good for a four hour chunk of gameplay. Then we have to consider the cast - this part is really important because even the coolest, best designed game is going to be a flop if the cast doesn't buy in and get hype about what the game is about. I think Tales from the Loop was the fastest we've ever gone from "pick a game" to "confirm and announce" because of how well it fit all of that.



Once I ran the game concept by JP and we agreed it would be a good fit, finding a cast went super smoothly. One thing that's really great about running games for RollPlay has been that when people ask me "if you could GM for anyone, who would it be" I can smile and tell them I've already gotten to play with some of the most amazing players - my wish list is almost never about who I haven't played with yet but who I want to play with more. Obviously Gerry and Austin were such a welcome return to the show - the Dogs in the Vineyard one-shot is still one of our most talked-about shows and we'd been aching to collaborate with these folks again. djWheat, too, was a no-brainer for this show. A game set in the real world, in a very pop-culture saturated space, emulating particular types of movies and tv shows deserves a player who knows all the lines and references. Erin, too, was an easy pick for the game - I'd be hard pressed to think of anyone I've played with who is as enthusiastic and ready to bring their A game as she is. If you need any more proof, watch the Masks games. Erin is an avatar of the goddess of getting hype.

Mechanically, what I think makes Tales from the Loop interesting is that it feels like a hybrid of a lot of games I already think make for good viewing. It takes hints from the Powered by the Apocalypse family of games, and there's definitely some Blades in the Dark influence as well. I think that while a game like D&D can be really entertaining to watch, and fights can be fun for folks who are familiar with the rules, for a one shot, especially one where some of the audience might be less familiar with RPGs in general, you want a game that puts as much of the fiction at the forefront as possible. This frees up the players to focus on the story they're telling and makes the rules a light touch in nudging the game in a particular direction. There's a lot of player control in Tales from the Loop as well - because of the Luck points, and the idea of being able to push the characters in exchange for a condition, the game puts a lot of narrative control in the hands of the players. With the right group, and a willingness to

share the story, you end up in a position to make a pretty great one-shot.

You might have noticed, if you watched the show, that I was doing things a bit differently on my side of the screen. There are a few places in the game where instead of stopping to correct a rules misplay I just let it slide for the sake of the narrative. You might have noticed, too, that we all took a much larger-than-usual role in narrating and voicing ideas for the game and for scenes. This is partly a stylistic choice - giving up narrative control to the players can be a big help when you're all jamming on an idea and paying too much attention to whose "job" it is to describe something can tie your hands when you really want them free. It's also partly the responsibility of the game. It's in the rules that the players should be allowed to frame scenes and collaborate on the world. I loved how often Gerry would jump in with "hey what if..."

This kind of thing is the freedom of a one-shot - it lets you bend the rules and take liberties that you might not want to take in a larger game, though I have to say, after playing Tales from the Loop as a one-sitting game, I'd absolutely love to explore the more sandboxy rules variants. All in all, I think the game did a great job supporting us and giving us just enough detail to work with for our game, and I'd absolutely suggest it as a one-shot for folks looking for a system to try out or fill in a hole in their gaming schedule. If you've played a full campaign of the game, hit me up on Twitter and let me know how it goes? I'm super curious!



↑  
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PLAYERS →









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IDER  
LECOM.

FROM  
THUNDER BAY  
WITH LOVE.

RATIONS.

WATER.



# MOUSE GUARD

## ROLLPLAY ONE-SHOT

# LITTLE HEROES

Sometimes dreams do come true. Back in Issue Eight, talking about games I'd like to play on RollPlay some day, I said;

### Mouse Guard

First and foremost, the source material is amazing. If you're a fan of Redwall and haven't seen or read Mouse Guard, definitely check out the comic. It's an amazingly cool fantasy story about a medieval mouse civilization that struggles to survive in a hostile world after a terrible war with a kingdom of weasels. There are no humans, and it feels a little like a dark ages setting where the monsters are animals and the crusades were between mouse knights and weasel saracens. It's way grittier than it ought to be for how cute the characters are. It'd make a fantastic one-shot and I think the way that combat is handled with cards and bluffing and trying to out-guess your enemies is really clever and makes for some good plays. Lots of "oh snap!" moments available for the audience.

<http://www.mouseguard.net/book/role-playing-game/>



What's exciting about this isn't just that I get to play a game I've loved since way back when, but that I get to play it and share it with the cast and with you. As of the time of writing this, we've scheduled and announced but not played Mouse Guard yet. I'm going to be taking Zeke, Bikeman, Fairlight and Trist on an adventure through the gritty-yet-adorable depths of the Mouse Territories and I'm so excited about it. I want to expand a little more on some thoughts I have about Mouse Guard and why I think it'll be a great game.

First, the core mechanisms for reward in the game are directly tied to two things - having your character do things and having them complicate their lives because of what they believe. You're going to see something familiar when we play - I stole part of the reward system for Mirrorshades. Every character has a Belief, an Instinct and a Goal - as they pursue their goal, their lives will be complicated by their Beliefs and Instincts, and I think we're going to get all kinds of excellent scenes and moments from the clash of Beliefs and Instincts between the various members of the patrol. In addition, each character has Traits that act as a character-focused double-edged sword. If, for example, you take the trait "Aggressive" then you're going to be able to use it to your advantage and get an extra die when you need to push hard for your desires, but you'll also get rewarded, in the form of Checks (a kind of currency you can spend during rest time to recover) by showing how your Aggressive nature hinders you. Maybe you push when you should be gentle. Maybe you're hot headed when you should have been calm. Players in Mouse Guard are rewarded when they show



us how their characters aren't perfect. I think that kind of flawed-character reward structure really encourages fun moments to watch.

Secondly, the game has a built-in structure that lends itself really well to focused play. Too often in a game we make characters and then have to struggle to fit them together, like ill-fitting pieces of a puzzle we can't quite make out. In Mouse Guard, the players are instructed to create members of a Patrol - a group of mice tasked with protecting the Mouse Territories from all sorts of threats. They have a structured hierarchy and, most importantly, a mission. In a campaign, mission-based play can sometimes become repetitive (and most Mouse Guard games end up moving away from the structure, rather than towards it) but for a one-shot, having a clear and obvious goal is super important. Play flows from the GM Turn to the Player turn smoothly, mechanically enforcing the game's overall structure and fitting it nicely to the break-and-broadcast standard times we have for RollPlay. Now, I haven't prepped for it, yet, and we all know that GM prep always breaks when we hit the table, but Mouse Guard is going to do a lot of the heavy lifting for me. I'm super curious to see which characters are grizzled vets of the Weasel Wars and which ones are tenderpaws, striving to prove their worth.

The thing I think I'm most excited about, though, is watching the change in the audience and players' perception of the game. The setting of Mouse Guard is so easily misinterpreted



- inherently when we think about playing mice, we think of cute, soft helpless little creatures and oh, isn't it so adorable they have swords and little cloaks? I think this is a feature, not a bug, because when we're in the game, watching these guardmice struggle to survive, doing pitched battle with snakes and fleeing from the hellish talons of owls, we can remember when we thought being a mouse would be cute. Ultimately, the theme of Mouse Guard is the struggle of the territories to survive despite mouse nature - to run and hide, to forage instead of build. The characters are, like all PCs, exceptional in some way, but set apart. The loneliness of guardianship and fighting for what we believe in are big parts of the game, and I'm really excited to see the players engage with those themes.

If it goes well, I think there's definitely a chance we'll give Torchbearer a try, too..





**ROLLPLAY  
COURT  
OF  
SWORDS  
A NEW FACE IN  
AN OLD WORLD**

Court of Swords, as with any D&D campaign that's been running for 30+ sessions, can be a little intimidating or weird to jump into. It's a game that not only has its own world and characters defined, but it's a game group that has played together for a ton of time, developing their own in-jokes, references and understanding of the game. On top of that, despite the relative simplicity of the rules, if you haven't played much Dungeons & Dragons, it can be tricky to make the "right" decisions to create a 5th level character that you're going to enjoy playing and who is going to survive in the admittedly very deadly world of the game. There's a lot conspiring against a new player feeling comfortable or like they're fitting in, and when we started talking about having Anne join the group, I knew I wanted to find some ways above-and-beyond my usual business to help her feel like her character (and by extension, her contributions as a player to the overall narrative of our game) was something she'd be excited to play.

Thankfully, I know a few things about Anne that are true. First of all, she's tough - I knew that the challenge of learning her character and surviving the game by making

smart tactical decisions wouldn't wear her down. Anne isn't someone I have to worry about pushing too hard on that front, I know she'll push back. Secondly, I know Anne commits to things - she's the kind of player who is going to care about the game, her character and the world. She's not someone who does these sorts of things half-assed. Third, Anne's a team player. She's someone I knew I could trust to play in a way that would make the game fun not just for her, but for Dan and Max and JP, too. This is why picking the right

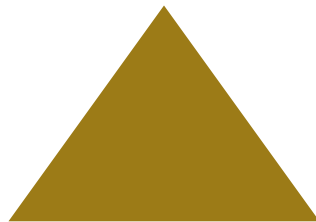


folks to play with is so important - I'm really lucky that we have such a great selection of humans to choose from when we invite new players. So what I wanted to do was help Anne feel like she was jumping right into things in a way that mattered. Here are a few things I did to try and support Anne and give her a space in the game world.

### **Love Letter, Part Deux**

First, I started off her introduction to the game not as "you're some random stranger, here to join the party" but as someone who is already established in the setting. In a lot of ways, Živa knows more about the City of Brass than Berg or

Ramus do. The City of Brass is huge, but since the area of the game we're focusing on is a little more rough and tumble, and contains a big halfling population, having their equivalent of a Robin Hood type character makes perfect sense, and I wanted to run with that. Mechanically, I did what all good GMs do and I stole stuff from other games. In this case, I treated Živa like she was an Apocalypse World character - I gave her a move to set up her entry into the world and gave her some hard choices to make to frame that move, then asked a bunch of questions, giving her some NPCs to ground her character in an existing framework. Here's the "welcome to the game" question I wrote up.





You've been casing the House of the Falcon for some time now, you and your friends, waiting for the right opportunity to strike. Let's see how your planning went. Roll 2d6 and add one. On a 10+ choose two, on a 7-9 choose one.

- You know a secret way in and out of the manor

- You know how to undo the magic protecting the vault

- Your digging around hasn't attracted any undue attention

On a 6 or less, the job's a catastrophe already, you just don't know it yet...

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# SWAN SONG

“As far as i can tell you are pink haired elephants who we  
never transported anywhere.”

– Victor Kovacs



## Swan Song: Episode 08

June 13<sup>th</sup>, 3200 Planet Subhadra

- Mission: Deliver Omar Ibn Said + his gear to Research Station Al-Farabi
- Sitrep: station destroyed, Professor gone squirrely, Madari Drug runners on-planet, Swan Song out of fuel and damaged
- Nearest system: Tovar (planets: Tovar VII, a silicate-mining world, a "labour planet" controlled by the "Homeland Federation" a right-wing british-style worker's party)
  - hebrew culture  
→ jewish names!
  - Also in-system is Exchange Station TVL-434 aka Taxila Station, a backwater spaceport

① Deal with whatever's still happening on Subhadra

- refuel at the Madari outpost, destroy the Blue Fever supplies
- deal with doctor crazy pants, who wants to use the Relay to communicate with the V'ad
- the V'ad?

② Refuel enough to get to Tovar

③ Elouhaba isn't a great find, but TVL-434 has fuel and repair facilities enough to get the Swan Song back up and running, plus a few opportunities:

~~2 10 18~~

- Mr. Falcon gets in touch
- An encrypted message arrives, then vanishes mysteriously
- Heather Montsay gets in touch with Higgs (she's a local contractor in hot water)

- + smuggle for Montsay
- + take silica shipment to Vinaya
- + take passengers to Onintza

### During the Session Notes:

- her name is Odette Rainier

Jean-Jacques Provost  
(cyberinje)

minor run in with Titan, "he doesn't know"  
Onintza is under new mgmt, the Purity Initiative in control

} "A Stranger In the Alps"

→ the "Taylor Swift" a blockade runner, highly damaged

LIFE < \$?

VENGEANCE > \$?

chemicals are 20,000 +/- 20% roll

10K/ to revive @ Exchange

Kelayah Biz hears about the sale.

wants  
Pi

Nathan Benjamin Farmer

► Dr. Mendel

► Mr. Meier, the exchange looking for Rainier / the Al Cult

# Swan Song GM Notes

**Commentary**

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## Sitrep: Station Destroyed

Isn't this just business as usual for the crew of the Swan Song? I mean, without knowing we were staring down the barrel of a deadly staircase, I feel like this kind of thing was fairly common. We love our heroes the most when the shit is really hitting the fan, don't we? If everything went smoothly, I think we'd miss the chaos.

## Tovar

### Planet:Elouahabu

*SWN Sector Generator, 18 June 2014 [created 18 June 2014]*

Tagging:

Planet:Elouahabu

System:TOVAR

### **Nav Designation: Tovar VII**

**Atmosphere:** Invasive, toxic atmosphere.

**Temperature:** Temperate.

**Biosphere:** No native biosphere.

**Population:** Billions of inhabitants.

**Tech Level:** Tech Level 3. 20th-century technology.

**Tags:** #HeavyMining,  
#HostileBiosphere.

Welcome to Elouahabu, an excellent planet to crash land on and almost die. Usually when we introduce a new system to the game, I do a little googling and establish some parameters based on the name of the system and the planet itself. The names are randomly generated for me using the system generator, so in a way, the structures of Stars Without Number keep me on my toes as a GM as well. In this case, the thought process for making Elouahabu a kind of space Israel

went - Tovar -> Castilian Spain -> researching Spanish history, learning a bunch about Ashkenazi -> reading about Israel.

Another example of letting the game lead the players into new learning. We never really got to see too much of this planet, except the conflict that kept the characters here, but that's the thing about prep, sometimes you imagine you'll need it and you don't.

## **Doctor Crazypants**

Sometimes leave weird notes for myself. You don't have silly nicknames for your NPCs?

## **Her Name is Odette Rainier**

It turns out that when you describe a character as being "a cyborg played by Natalie Dormer" people get real excited. I always loved the stuff we developed around the AI theocracy of Cabral, and developing characters to illustrate cultural stuff was always really fun for me. I would love to have a chance to explore their civilization more someday - I like the idea of a whole people who are ruled by an AI-as-deity. The absurdity of French cyberninja was too much to gloss over, too.

## **The Taylor Swift and the Stranger in the Alps**

I love naming ships. It's a great opportunity to be tongue in cheek and to really help reinforce that these people - the characters in Asgard Sigma - are so out of touch with the world of the audience that they think Taylor Swift is a good name for a spaceship. I mean, it sounds fast, doesn't it? It's also a great opportunity to make jokes and break the fourth wall. I always felt like I had some creative leeway to name ships in a weird way - that it made sense for the setting even if

we all knew it was just Adam winking at the audience. I'd say this would have been an opportunity for some name-a-thing monetized DLC style content but honestly I liked naming spaceships too much to let anyone else do it.

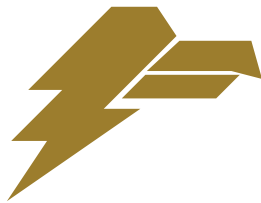
## **Morality Equations**

I'd make this little notes about lessons that Pi would learn from the crew, and finding them scattered through my notes later always made me smile. Life is not as important as money but revenge is more important. It's the parenting metaphor that would run through the campaign entire - there are so many ways to screw up a kid, though I suppose most of us don't have parents who were homicidal space bandits.

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Oh no! This page is in another castle... Please ignore.



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